Does your continuity plan hold water or will it be powerless to help when the rains come?

Linda Young discusses contingency plans for dental practices

Recorded here? Make no assumptions that the person following the procedure in the event of a disaster has any prior knowledge of the process. If directing the reader to ‘switch on the surgery’ state exactly how to do this and where the switch is located. Think about where these procedure papers are kept. If storing documents electronically and off site, perhaps on a portable hard drive, or using virtual storage, make sure the location of these files is detailed in the plan, together with any logon, password and file path information. Perhaps the documents need to be protected from editing, so store them so that they can only be accessed as ‘read only’.

Critical documents and information held on computer may already have been copied and backed up, but where are the copies and back-ups kept? Store them locally and they may also be affected or destroyed by the disaster, or may be inaccessible because the area is cordoned off. Installing a fire proof safe in the practice to safeguard documents that are in the short to medium term irreplaceable is a good idea. This will safeguard them against theft and fire, but will not protect them against a flood. Perhaps a set of certified copies should be stored off site.

Back up a practice’s ability to react quickly to any incident that affects their ability to trade is critical. The secret to achieving this is in continuity planning, and regularly reviewing the continuity plan to ensure it is still accurate and relevant. A good continuity plan should take into account all the practices’ resources ie its premises, services, technology and people.

Making continuity planning part of the way a practice operates helps prepare for ‘business as usual’ in the quickest possible time

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Have you planned for a ‘rainy day’?
on how to draw up a plan. The time invested in collating all the information required for the plan at this stage could be one of the best investments a practice has ever made. The things that seem to be very simple now, when the practice is operating without any problems, could be insurmountable in the event of a crisis.

**Level of detail**

There are no hard and fast rules as to how long or short a continuity plan has to be. The level of detail in the plan is down to the continuity plan manager, who should never assume that everyone will still be around or be able to remember the essential processes, telephone numbers etc. So that your practice can continue to function without its premises and / or key personnel ensure that all the day to day activities and processes are all documented, and that they are all reviewed regularly.

At the same time think about processes that would only come into force if the continuity plan were activated. Why not create a set of procedures specifically for when the plan is activated? Include details in the plan of where these procedures are stored! Don’t forget to make sure everyone in the practice is familiar with the plan, and regularly test it together to see what might need to be changed, and if indeed the plan really works!!

**Testing**

Once the plan has been written and carefully checked think about testing it. Don’t be complacent and think that once the plan has been written it cannot be changed. To assume this is to take a big risk. Even the simplest and smallest of plans will have some amendments. Make sure the plan is kept up to date by reviewing it, even down to the smallest detail. Test the plan on a regular basis, combining this with a team building exercise. Make the testing scenario as realistic as possible, change the theme each time it’s tested from loss of premises, to people, to services and technology. Look at the impact of short-term losses to the medium and longer term. Keep a diary of the outcomes of each test so that key information that arises during each test isn’t forgotten about and can be built into the plan to improve the process.

**Success**

This article is not meant to be about how to write a practice continuity plan: it’s about thinking outside the box; thinking around all those decisions that will have to be made and which will make the difference to a plan, and your business’ ability to carry on trading.

Success in a crisis isn’t about good luck: it’s about good management continuity planning. Good management of anything involves planning, organising, implementing, controlling and finally reviewing.

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About the author

Linda Young was the Information Security Manager and continuity plan holder for an international company for over 20 years. She is currently writing a practical resource manual to be published in 2013, which is designed for dental practices looking to improve their team’s management skills.

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